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ABSTRACT

Each year, all students at the Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School (Brooklyn, New York) take a minimum of 17 periods of Jewish Studies in addition to a full program of secular studies. Halakhah (Jewish law) used to be taught within the Talmud class, but teachers often relied on the fact that students had absorbed the basic lexicon of Halakhic terminology at home and gave it a cursory treatment in class. But because students came from a wide spectrum of homes, many lacked the basic skills and vocabulary of Halakhic studies. In addition, teachers generally taught Halakhah from their own perspective of Halakhic observance, and some traditions were thus being ignored. In order to address these problems, a four-year curriculum in Halakhah was instituted. This document describes the goals of the program, gives an outline of the program, describes the teaching staff and their preparation for the program, and discusses how the program was refined. A series of tests and classroom observations indicated that the students did not have the desired skills before the course, but by its completion they had mastered these skills and understood the basic structure and development of the Halakhah. A summary test administered to graduating seniors and covering all four years' work indicated that there was a high retention rate. Parents and students have commented on the serious attitude that students now have toward the study of Halakhah. Sephardic students and their parents have praised the program for presenting Sephardic customs and traditions as having equal standing with those of the dominant Ashkenazic community. (JB)

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בית ספר תיכון של הישיבה רפלטבוש
על שם מר יואל ברברמן

YESHIVAH OF FLATBUSH
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Report on the Development of the Four-year Halakhah Program of The Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School

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Report on the Development of the
Four-year Halakhah Program of
The Yeshivah of Flatbush
Joel Braverman High School

Raymond A. Harari and Joel B. Wolowelsky

Background

Each year, all students at the Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School take a minimum of 17 periods of Jewish Studies (in addition to a full program of secular studies). This includes Bible, Talmud, Jewish Philosophy, Jewish History and Hebrew Language and Literature, and Halakhah (Jewish law). Until this program was initiated six years ago, Halakhah was a "fifth wheel" to the Talmud department. There was a general guideline of the topics to be taught within the Talmud class, but teachers--whose main concern was the Talmud text--generally approached the subject in a somewhat haphazard way, without the structure and substance of a thought-out course.

Very often, teachers were relying on the fact that students had absorbed the basic lexicon of halakhic terminology through their home discussions and observances, using the class discussion to "fill in" missing details. But we found that students came from a wide spectrum of homes and that many lacked the basic skills and vocabulary of halakhic studies.

In addition, we found that teachers were generally teaching the Halakhah section through their own perspective of Halakhic observance. But we had students from a wide range of religious traditions --35% of the school is Sephardic-- and in many cases their traditions were not being discussed.

Goals of the New Program

We decided to address these main issues by creating a four-year curriculum in Halakhah. First, a committee of teachers met to set out the main goals of the program. We expected students to acquire the skills necessary for using the Mishnah Berurah, the generally accepted basic contemporary Halakhic text for the study of prayer and Sabbath laws. They were to understand the indexing, footnoting, etc. of the text and be able to deal with a text which they had not seen before.

We expected students to understand the development of the halakhah and trace it through its classic texts, beginning with the Bible and Talmud and continuing through the later codifiers. They would be expected to know the names and dates of the authors of these texts and the basic commentators thereon, as well as the names and works of the major Ashkenazic and Sephardic contemporary Halakhists.

Students would be expected to know the practical halakhic decisions of the issues discussed as they related to the various religious observances, and specific halakhic terms and concepts.

We wanted students to be able to relate to the study of halakhah on a more serious level, treating it with at least the same "respect" as is accorded other academic studies in the school and thereby reversing the attitude that had existed in the school prior to the institution of the program.

We expected students to develop a respect for the pluralism that exists within the halakhic tradition, realizing that the system itself recognizes the legitimacy of competing (and sometimes conflicting) rulings. Particular emphasis was placed on presenting Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions as equally normative.

Developing a positive attitude towards practical halakhic observance is a general goal of all Judaic studies courses and this course was expected to contribute to that general goal.

Outline of the Program

We developed a uniform syllabus, a source book, and student workbook for each of the eight terms of high school. (These are in Hebrew, the language of instruction for these courses.) We planned out the skills we wanted the students to acquire, the sources with which we expected them to have fluency, the vocabulary which we wanted them to develop, the specific areas with which they were to have familiarity, and the different customs to which we felt all students should have been exposed.

Grade 9 studies Prayer, centered on a study of the Mishnah Berurah; grade 10, the Sabbath, again using the Mishnah Berurah; grade 11, topics in Yoreh Deah (respect for parents, interpersonal relations, laws of mourning, proper treatment of animals, charity, laws relating to the Land of Israel); and grade 12, additional topics in Yoreh Deah (kashrut and family law). There are approximately 180 students on each of the grade levels.

On a structural level, we used as our model the math Regents course. Throughout the course, all students know the extent of the material that they were expected to master and the types of questions they were expected to be able to answer. All students take the same uniform exam--despite the fact that the level of sophistication in various classes might differ considerably--and there is an objective measure of success (the Regents exam grade). To establish the reality of our "revolution" in the Halakhah curriculum, we insisted on having a uniform objective (multiple-choice) exam with the report card grade very strongly correlate with the exam grade.

Each unit has the same component parts:

1. A set of questions which the student must answer at home, preparatory to the classroom lesson, based on a study of specific texts included in the Mishnah Berurah or the accompanying source book. These are reviewed in class to be sure that students have a technical mastery of the texts involved.

2. A classroom lesson on the subject. The format changes, depending on the teacher, class level, and topic; it includes lecture, demonstration, discussion, debate, etc. or some appropriate combination.

3. A set of review questions for the lesson. In some classes these will be reviewed in class,in others they will be assigned for outside review.

4. A listing of general terms in Halakhah and general rabbinics which constitute an ongoing review of the terminology of the discipline. This is covered in a brief review session at the close of the lesson.

Teaching Staff

The program is headed by a department chairman. Nine teachers serve in the department, all of whom also teach in other Judaic Studies departments. Teachers are expected to work together as a team on each grade level, to decide together on the varying emphases to be placed on each sub-topic to prepare a set of four uniform exams, and to recommend changes for the course in subsequent years.

Approximately once a month the teachers on a specific grade level meets as a group with the chairman for a working lunch to discuss class progress. The agenda includes coordination of the schedule of lessons to ensure that all classes will be up to the same lesson for each of the four uniform tests; discussion of problems encountered in the class presentations; requests for eliminating topics from the uniform exam based on difficulties arising in the classroom presentation; and exchange of strategies for teaching various lessons.

While the exchange is usually limited to the department members, sometimes other colleagues are brought in to the discussion. For example, teachers in the freshman program found that they were having trouble teaching shaot zemaniyot, a halakhic topic requiring mathematical calculations. A member of the school's math department was invited to prepare a model lesson on the topic and he continued to work with the teachers on an individual basis. At another time, teachers realized that across the grade level students were lacking information in areas of rabbinics not covered in the Halakhah curriculum. The Chairman of Talmudic Studies brought the topic into the Talmud curriculum.

Refining the Program

Before the uniform exam, all teachers review the uniform exam to be sure that all the material included was appropriate and that proper emphasis was placed on various units. Differences of opinion on individual questions are decided by the chairman after consulting all of the teachers.

After each of the exams the faculty meets to do an item analysis of the exam based on a review the printout of statistics for each of the questions. This focuses on understanding why a particular question was missed by large numbers of students. If this was due to improper wording of the question, the item is reworded or removed from the department's bank of questions. If the analysis shows that one teacher's class had skewed difficulty with the item, a conference was held with the teacher to discuss the problem. If the problem seems to be across the grade level, a conference of all the teachers was held to discuss if the issue is one of strategy in presenting the material or inappropriateness of the material within the curriculum. Ideas for correcting the problem for the next year are presented. The teachers also review the distribution of grades for the entire student body and set cut scores for A, B, C, D, and F.

At the end of the year, the entire department meets to suggest changes in the curriculum for the next year. Throughout the year, the Principal and Chairman conduct structured class observations regularly and meet with individual teachers to offer suggestions and guidance.

Changes in the Program

We have made a number of changes in the program over the past few years. The first category of changes involves modification of the curriculum, adding and eliminating specific units, changing emphases, etc. Each year of the program a new workbook has been produced incorporating the changes suggested by the faculty. These changes are themselves assessed in the same manner. When a unit is shortened or lessened, there was a resulting change in the sources assigned.

The second category involves modification in the uniform test. Originally, the test was made up of only objective questions in order to prevent an individual teacher's subjective judgement influencing the grade. Because we felt that written essays offer a better way of showing understanding of the subject, and because we felt that in general students should have the opportunity to write as much as possible, we looked for a way of introducing an essay section and after some experimentation worked out an appropriate system.

Evaluation of the Program

Series of tests and classroom observations indicate that students for the most part did not have the desired skills before the course, and that at its completion they have mastered these skills, understand the basic structure and development of the halakhah, and know the practical details as we planned. A recent summary test administered to graduating seniors and covering all four years work showed that there is a high retention rate.

Parents and students have commented on the serious attitude that students now have towards the study of Halakhah in the school and how it contrasts with the attitude that prevailed before the program was introduced. Sephardic students (and their parents) in particular have praised the program for presenting Sephardic customs and traditions as have equal standing with those of the dominant Ashkenazic community.

Teachers who resisted implementing the program at its inception and criticized it as an intrusion on their teaching independence and creativity are now among the most ardent supporters of the program within the school and outside its walls.

Uniqueness of the Program

At this time, our school is unique in that it has a student population which is approximately one-third Sephardic; most other schools have a more predominant Ashkenazic majority. However, emigration from Israel has yielded a more developed Sephardic community in the United States (as witnessed by the development of Sephardic congregations in the Long Island, Northern Jersey, Queens and other areas outside of the New York City area). Other yeshivot will soon have significant Sephardic minorities. Ours is the only program which offers a balanced Ashkenazic-Sephardic presentation, and this will be an important model for other yeshivot.

Most yeshivot teach Halakhah with the assumption that they maintain a student body which is relatively homogeneous with regard to halakhic observance. Our curriculum assumes a heterogeneous student body. In addition, our program is designed so that it can be used in a coed or sex-segregated school.

We have not simply created source books and workbooks to accompany a printed curriculum. We have worked with the teachers on a day-to-day basis, creating an atmosphere that enriched the teaching staff as well as the student population.